

# Flatwoods Plum

(*Prunus umbellata*)

By Fred Nation, Educator, Baldwin County

**F**latwoods plum is a small tree that is native to the American southeast, from North Carolina to central Florida, and westward to central Texas. In Alabama, it is scattered, sometimes fairly frequently, in the southern two-thirds of the state, where it is found in a variety of habitats, such as swamp edges, open roadsides, and pine flatwoods.

Unlike many of its relatives in the rose family, flatwoods plum usually does not form clumps or thickets. It often occurs singly, as a large shrub or small, irregular understory tree, to about 20 feet tall. The leaves are alternate, oblong, to about two inches long, with sharp-pointed tips, and many small teeth on the margins. Masses of showy white blossoms open in the early spring, on wood of the previous season. The flowers, with five petals and many stamens, are borne singly or in small groups of two to five. The fruits are oblong drupes, about one-half inch long, nearly black when ripe. Even when fully ripe, they are bitter and astringent, with a large, hard pit. Though unpalatable to humans, the fruits of *Prunus umbellata* are valuable forage for white-tailed deer, black bears, feral pigs, foxes, and many bird species. Flatwoods plum is a pioneer species, with efficient seed dispersal



Photo by Fred Nation

mechanisms for migrating into regenerating burned or clearcut areas.

The genus *Prunus* is large, with about 200 species worldwide, and it contains many economically important members. In addition to the plums, this genus includes cherries, sloes, peaches, nectarines, apricots, and almonds.

Flatwoods plum and many of its close relatives are quite ornamental, with masses of handsome white or pink flowers, and they are often planted as "flowering cultivars" in landscapes.

The plums and cherries have long histories of medicinal usage. An infusion or tea made from the bark has been used as an emetic to induce vomiting, and to treat coughs. The bark and leaves in the genus *Prunus* contain varying amounts of glycosides that are converted under some conditions into prussic acid, or hydrogen cyanide, which is extremely poisonous. Wilted foliage, especially, contains enough cyanide to be dangerous to livestock. Ripe plums and black cherries have been added to clear, newly-made corn whiskey, to give it an aged, finished color that takes several years to achieve in an oak barrel.

Other common or folk names for flatwoods plum are "black sloe" and "hog plum." The Alabama state champion, located in Baldwin County, is 25.8 inches in circumference, 24 feet tall, with a huge average crown spread of 70 feet. 🌳



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